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# IRON AGE BURIAL IN WALES: PATTERNS, PRACTICES AND PROBLEMS

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## Abstract

Until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iron Age burial in Britain was thought to be largely archaeologically invisible. However, over the last 40 years the recovery of large assemblages of human remains, often from pits and ditches rather than beneath monumental structures, has changed our understanding of Iron Age funerary practices. The problem though is that the majority of this material derives from core areas of study, particularly southern England and Yorkshire. Our knowledge of burial in the more peripheral areas of Britain such as Wales is much more poorly understood. The perceived paucity of burials from such regions is often still interpreted as resulting from the practice of archaeologically invisible disposal methods such as excarnation or the scattering of cremated remains. This paper presents a comprehensive review and analysis of Iron Age human remains in Wales. Although the resource for study is relatively small, a variety of practices, disposal methods and treatments of bodies can be recognised which challenge our current narratives. The scarcity of burials when compared to other parts of Britain such as Wessex is suggested to be a result of both poor preservation and bias in archaeological research strategies rather than the dominance of an ‘invisible’ burial rite.

## Introduction

Fifty years ago Iron Age burial in Britain was considered uncommon, particularly when compared with the abundant evidence for contemporary burial forms on the Continent. Human remains that were encountered on Iron Age sites appeared to the excavators to be casually buried, often amongst domestic debris, or interred into any convenient hole. There were two significant exceptions – a group of inhumations under small square barrows in eastern Yorkshire characteristic of the ‘Arras’ culture (Stead 1965; 1979; 1991) and cremation cemeteries of the Aylesford Swarling tradition, often accompanied by rich grave goods, in south-eastern England (Birchall 1965). However, the absence of formal burial traditions elsewhere in Britain was widely accepted. Hodson (1964) even considered the lack of a regular burial form as a ‘negative type-fossil’ of his ‘Woodbury Culture’ into which he grouped together the whole of southern Britain outside of the south-east.

There are now considerable collections of human remains from Iron Age Britain. The vast majority of these assemblages have been recovered from southern England and Yorkshire and have been subject to much discussion (e.g. Wilson 1981; Whimster 1981; Wait 1985; Stead 1991; Hill 1995; Cunliffe 1995; Sharples 2010; Giles 2012; Madgwick 2008; Harding 2016). Yet the corpus of material relating to burial in the more peripheral regions of Britain is much less substantial. The evidence for Iron Age burial in Wales for instance is perceived to be particularly poor. In his seminal study of Iron Age burial practices, Rowan Whimster (1981) identified only eight records of human remains from the entire country. Although he acknowledged that this situation may have been exaggerated by poor preservation and a paucity of extensive excavation, he was in no doubt that the overall lack of burials was “...real, rather than apparent” (1981, 167) and implied the widespread practice of ‘invisible’ disposal methods. This perspective has been highly influential. Cunliffe afforded burial in

Wales only a single sentence of consideration in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of *Iron Age Communities* (2010, 522) for instance, while Harding in his recent review of the material in *Death and Burial in Iron Age Britain* (2016) hardly considered the region at all except to state that “...Iron Age funerary practices in Wales remain elusive archaeologically” (2016, 47). Yet despite this perception there is a growing collection of Iron Age human remains from Wales and the absence of detailed study of this material seriously inhibits our understanding of the ways that individual and communal identities were created and expressed in the region in later prehistory.

This paper will present a comprehensive review and analysis of human remains in Wales from the beginning of the Iron Age through to the Roman period. This will demonstrate that the resource for study although relatively small, when compared to Wessex or Yorkshire, is much larger than current perceptions. Far from practising an invisible burial rite, Iron Age communities in Wales undertook a variety of practices. A range of disposal methods and treatments of bodies, possibly related to age and gender, can be tentatively recognised. The apparent paucity of burial evidence are suggested to be a result of a combination of poor preservation and bias in archaeological research strategies which tend to favour exploring the ditches and interiors of enclosed settlements rather than the areas outside their boundaries. This is particularly acute in Wales where there are rarely large-area developer-funded excavations on conducive (alkaline) soils which could rectify this problem.

### **Current understanding in Wales**

Despite a rigorous search Whimster could only find a handful of poorly-dated burials in Wales, which he argued implied the widespread practice of invisible disposal methods such as excarnation or water burial (1981, 167). There has been little subsequent detailed examination of the evidence in Wales, although there have been two important reviews of the evidence that have challenged this position. In the early 1990s Ken Murphy published a gazetteer identifying 45 records of human remains from 18 sites as part of a discussion of Iron Age burials discovered in advance of development at Plas Gogerddan, Ceredigion (Murphy 1992). The gazetteer was not intended to be a comprehensive account of later prehistoric burial in Wales, but rather, to provide a guide to useful parallels. Interestingly, it included 22 burials published before 1981 and not included in Whimster’s study. It is unclear why Whimster was unable to locate these burials in his original search. He did include an antiquarian reference to a burial in a ‘stone cist’ noted in Wainwright’s (1967, 40-1) account of his excavations at the enclosure of Coygan Camp for instance (Whimster 1981, Appendix J, 2), but made no reference to the five human metacarpals found within the Iron Age deposits or two flexed inhumations found near to the southern entrance (see Wainwright 1967, 40-2, 44, 55-6, 83, 164, 191-2, 195-203). However, in a brief analysis of the burial evidence Murphy (1992, 28-30) identified two dominant modes of treatment in Wales: crouched or extended inhumations in or around hillforts, and secondary cremations or inhumations at Bronze Age ritual/funerary monuments.

More recently, Karen Pollack (2006, 11-21) undertook an evaluation of Iron Age burial practices as part of a study into the disposal of human remains in Roman Wales. Incorporating new discoveries she identified 62 burials from 23 sites (Pollack 2006, table 1). This provided a larger sample on which to base some limited conclusions, but no detailed analysis of the nature of the remains was undertaken. However, she was able to expand on

Murphy's (1992) conclusions and categorised five different modes of treatment which comprised:

- Burial at hillforts
- Secondary burial at Bronze Age monuments
- Cave burials and bog bodies
- Late Iron Age burials of status
- Fragmented skeletal material

While Pollack drew attention to the growing evidence of complexity within the burial pattern to be found in Wales, she concluded that the majority of mortuary practices were likely to mirror those methods of disposal found elsewhere in Britain (2006, 20). The current state of knowledge therefore is poor, but can be summarised:

- There were a range of practices in Iron Age Wales, which mirrored those observed in England, such as inhumations in a crouched position
- Hillforts and settlements were an important focus for burial, particularly the boundary ditches
- Bronze Age monuments such as barrows and standing stones appear to have attracted burials in the Iron Age
- Both inhumation and cremation are attested, but inhumations form the bulk of burials

Nonetheless, considerable caution needs to be exercised in accepting such broad generalisations. While the surveys by Murphy (1992) and Pollack (2006) have increased the size of the dataset, there has been little contextual analysis of body treatment and spatial patterning or holistic pathological and osteological studies. As a consequence almost nothing is currently known about health, gender and age differentiation and the 'normal' method of disposal is unclear. Change in practices over time is particularly poorly understood. The character of funerary practices in the Early and Middle Iron Age remain elusive, although formal graves outside settlements are argued to appear in the Late Iron Age and the presence of some high-status grave goods suggest they may represent local elites (Davies and Lynch 2000, 212-3; Pollack 2006, 19). While the burial evidence from Wales will clearly not represent the population as a whole, it does provide us with our most direct window onto the Iron Age population as well as potential insights into broader beliefs, social structures, gender distinctions and identities. As such it is vitally important that any human remains are recorded and all information extracted which can help us analyse the nature of later prehistoric communities in Wales.

### **Analysis of burial evidence in Wales: Patterns and practices**

Through a detailed examination of the literature and the collation of new discoveries from the last decade this study has identified 106 records of human remains (Appendix 1) plus six 'possibles' suggested by the proxy evidence of grave-goods or other evidence (Appendix 2). The sample is relatively small when compared to other areas of Britain – over 1,000 have been excavated on the chalklands of Yorkshire for example (Giles 2012, 94). However, the corpus is considerably larger than the eight burials originally identified by Whimster (1981) and such a sample provides a large enough population that broad patterns, practices and differences can begin to be tentatively explored.

### *Distribution of burials*

The majority of soils in Wales are acidic and not conducive to the preservation of bone. This seriously inhibits our ability to recover later prehistoric human bone assemblages. There are however areas of limestone geology providing alkaline conditions more suitable for the preservation of bone. These are principally located in the south-east and north-east of the country, but bands of limestone also exist in Pembrokeshire, the Gower peninsula and on the Isle of Anglesey. Unsurprisingly the majority of identified burials are located on these alkaline limestone-derived soils (Figure 1). The exception is the Gower where no Iron Age burials have been recorded, although this is to be expected as none of the Iron Age sites in the region have seen anything more than superficial examination.

Nonetheless, remains of burial have been noted on less conducive soils such as clay. These tend to be cremations (e.g. Castle Bucket, Pembrokeshire) or isolated bones such as at Castell Henllys, Pembrokeshire, and Caerau Hillfort, Cardiff, where micro-environments within sites provide suitable conditions for survival (e.g. alkaline soils derived from the decay of organic, midden material). However, where acidic soils dominate, other techniques of identification are required. Through careful excavation and observation at Plas Gogerddan, Ceredigion for instance, Ken Murphy (1992) was able to locate soil stains within sandy pit fills that represented human burials and from which body position and treatment could be ascertained. It is a salient point that excavators on later prehistoric sites in Wales should expect the presence of human burial and extra care should be taken when excavating pit fills in order to identify such evidence.

### *Chronological evidence*

There are significant difficulties around the secure dating of burials in Wales. In many cases a later prehistoric date has been ascribed either on association with an Iron Age site (e.g. a burial in the enclosure ditch at the hillfort of Castle Ditches, Llancarfan, Vale of Glamorgan (Hogg 1976)), the mode of burial (e.g. crouched inhumations at Merthyr Mawr) or the association with Iron Age grave goods (e.g. Gellinogwen, Anglesey). In many instances then, although an Iron Age date can be relatively confidently ascribed, there is little precision and changes over time are particularly difficult to determine. Greater precision is provided by twenty burials which have been radiocarbon dated to the period (Table 1).

The sample is small and the date ranges are broad for many of the sites. However, the earlier part of the Iron Age from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century BC appears to be dominated by cremation burial while the Middle and Late Iron Age appear dominated by inhumations and the deposition of isolated bones. Such evidence must be treated with caution, but the pattern may reflect broad changes in burial practice in Wales during the first millennium BC.

### *Categories of disposal*

Within the corpus of 106 burials five categories of disposal have been identified:

1. Complete bodies
2. Articulated remains

3. Heads or parts of heads
4. Isolated bones
5. Cremations

The relative proportions of the different categories of disposal are shown in Figure 2.

The largest group of deposits are complete bodies (46 records). Then there is a substantial drop to the group of articulated remains (21 records) and another drop to the next group of heads or parts of heads (13 records). Isolated bones (8 records) and cremations (10 records) are the least common. It appears clear therefore that the burial of complete humans was the most common event. These results are surprising as they are the opposite of that found in Wessex where isolated bones and skulls dominate the Iron Age assemblages (Sharples 2010, 261-8).

The results should not necessarily be taken at face value however since they could be affected by issues of recovery. First, many of the burials identified for this study were recorded before modern archaeological methods became widely used in the 1960s and 1970s and it is not clear whether isolated human bones mixed together with animal bones or other 'domestic' material would have been recognised. Second, there are issues of preservation within acidic soils. Complete inhumations were recognised at Plas Gogerddan, Ceredigion through the staining of the soil, but it is very unlikely that similar signifiers could be used to identify isolated human bones. Where soil conditions are more conducive for bone preservation such as at the hillfort of Dinorben, Denbighshire, isolated bone and skull fragments *are* the most common deposit (Gardner and Savory 1964).

### *Age and gender*

Taken as a whole there are data for 30 sexed burials (28% of the total assemblage) (Table 2). This shows that the number of identified males (14) is similar to the number of identified females (16) suggesting that although the sample is small, it is likely to be a balanced selection of individuals. The age of individuals was available for a much larger proportion of the overall assemblage with data for 60 burials (57% of the total assemblage), though precision was poor. The total collection of burials indicates the presence of 36 adults, 8 adolescents, 5 children and 11 infants/neonates. The proportion of immature burials seems somewhat low when compared with other Iron Age assemblages such as Suddern Farm in Wessex (estimated 300 adults, 80 children and 180 infants, Cunliffe and Poole 2000, 201) and may be affected by the poor preservation of smaller, immature, bones.

An examination of the age and sex of the different categories of disposal reveal some potentially significant patterns (Figure 3). Noticeably all age categories were represented in the sample of complete bodies although adults dominated the assemblage (63%). Articulated remains were also predominantly adults too, although there was a much higher proportion of infants/neonates (38.8%). Interestingly, the articulated remains were constituted by a much higher number of males, while cremations were dominated by adult females. Heads or parts of heads were dominated completely by adults or adolescents with children and infants/neonates absent from this category. Infants/neonates were also absent from cremation deposits.

### *Location and context of burial*

An analysis of the location of burial (Table 3) shows a preference for choosing to dispose of the dead within settlements and settlement boundaries (52% of total assemblage). Around 23% of burials are located close to settlements (<1 km), while 14 % are located more than 1 km away from known settlements. Twelve burials (11% of total) are located at Bronze Age ritual sites (e.g. barrows).

The data may however be somewhat misleading and requires critical assessment. Firstly, the supposed preference for burial within settlements and settlement boundaries does not necessarily reflect a genuine pattern. Locations beyond the edges of settlements are not often explored – the focus is generally on the boundary and interior of settlements – and this may skew the results in favour of settlement locations (e.g. note how the limit of excavation at Whitton, Vale of Glamorgan (Jarrett and Wrathmell 1981, fig. 2) and Walesland Rath, Pembrokeshire (Wainwright 1971, fig. 2) does not extend beyond the settlement boundaries).

Nevertheless, where large-scale excavation of settlement interiors has occurred the patterns of human remains are not necessarily what one would expect if these locations were the normal areas for disposal. For instance 15 records of human remains are recorded from within the hillfort of Dinorben, Denbighshire (Gardner and Savory 1964). Dinorben is one of the most extensively-excavated hillforts in Wales with Iron Age occupation spanning the 5<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Guilbert 1979; 1980). However, since the hillfort is situated on limestone and therefore possesses an underlying geology conducive to the survival of bone, the identification of only 15 records of human remains from five centuries of occupation seems remarkably small. There are also other indications of unusual practice. No complete bodies have been identified at Dinorben and of the 15 records of human remains, five are articulated remains, one is an isolated bone, and nine are heads or parts of heads. The assemblage was interpreted by the excavators as derived from the conspicuous display of heads taken as war trophies (Garnder and Savory 1964, 221). Cranial fragments were certainly found in one of the guard chambers and in the ditch near to the hillfort's main entrance, but the majority were recovered from the floor surfaces of roundhouses suggesting formalised selection and treatment of particular human remains, but not necessarily conspicuous display.

Unusual assemblages are also known from non-hillfort settlement contexts. At the unenclosed Iron Age settlement of Thornwell Farm, Gwent, seven records of human remains were recovered from within the settlement area, but all were neonatal or foetal and no adult remains were identified (Hughes 1996). In the Vale of Glamorgan, RAF St Athan is one of the most extensively excavated small enclosures in south-east Wales, but only three burials were identified within the settlement (Barber *et al.* 2006). Two were recorded from the enclosure ditch, but these were excavated by machine and little is known about their context of burial. The third burial was from a pit located opposite the entrance at the rear of the enclosure and contained only the legs of an adolescent.

Clearly burial within these settlements was not the normal method for disposal of the dead. This raises a number of questions, not least – where and how were most people disposed of? Complete bodies make up the vast majority of identified human remains in Wales and it is noticeable that 72% of complete bodies are found outside the core focus of settlement (Table 3). The vast majority (41% of total assemblage) actually come from locations near to, but not within settlements. For example, at RAF St Athan a large area to the west of the Iron Age

enclosure was investigated and two burials in pits were identified and dated to the Middle Iron Age (400-200 cal. BC).

Other evidence is suggestive of more formal burial outside settlements, possibly in cemeteries. In 1875 seven stone-built cists were discovered at Plashyatt, approximately 400m south-west of Coygan Camp, Carmarthenshire (Wainwright 1967). Each cist contained a contracted burial of an adult or adolescent suggesting an Iron Age date (see below), but the skeletons were replaced and covered with stones and a later prehistoric origin is not certain. Another possible cemetery is at Merthyr Mawr, Bridgend, where a dense concentration of human remains has been recovered piecemeal over the last 100 years (Wheeler 1925; Savory 1945-48; 1952; 1956; 1973), while four cremations identified 20 m outside of the outer rampart Castell Bucket, Pembrokeshire (Williams 1985), may also represent a formal burial ground.

### *Treatment of remains*

The majority of complete burials are found in pits or specifically dug graves and cists (28 of 47). Smaller numbers are known from boundary ditches and banks (five) and from beneath cairns, although this latter group, all from Merthyr Mawr (Wheeler 1925; Savory 1945-48; 1952; 1956; 1973), are poorly dated. Two complete inhumations are recorded from beneath a midden deposit just within the south-eastern entrance of Coygan Camp (Wainwright 1967) while two other antiquarian reports note the possibility of two bodies placed into peat bogs at Dolfawrfair, Ceredigion, and Llwynmawr, Carmarthenshire (D. Davies 1893; W. Davies 1813).

The complete bodies were normally crouched or loosely-flexed, but there were also three extended burials. The bodies could be positioned on their sides (right and left) or laid supine, but not prone (Tables 4 and 5). The greatest numbers were laid on their left-hand side (six) but this was only slightly more common than positioning them on their right-hand side (four). Only two crouched burials were laid supine, but all extended burials were placed in this position. Gender information where position of body is known was only available for eight burials. It appeared to show a preference to place men on their right-hand side or back and women on the left or right-hand side, but the sample size is too small to be of any great significance.

The orientation of the inhumations shows skeletons found with their heads pointing in almost all directions, but with a preference to be placed somewhere between north-west and north-east with a concentration to the north (Figure 4). This was true regardless of whether the body was positioned on the left or right-hand side, although the small sample of extended burials shows a different pattern with orientation thinly scattered between west and south.

There is no evidence that gender played an important role in the orientation of the head in burial. Analysis of the age of individuals however demonstrates that crouched or extended burial was not for adults alone. Age data was available for 27 out of the 46 complete inhumations. Adults were the most common (17) followed by children (4) and infants/neonates (4). Adolescents were the least common (two). Correlation between age and head orientation (15 individuals) showed a preference for adult's, adolescent's and children's heads to point to the north, but infant/neonatal burials show the reverse with a



concentration to the south (two) and east (one) (Figure 5). The size of the age sample is small and the imbalances may derive from chance or the poor preservation of immature bones, but indicate the possibility that infant/neonatal remains were selected for different treatment (see discussion of partially articulated infant remains at Thornwell Farm above).

This treatment of the body in the grave is remarkably similar to that identified in the pit burials of Wessex (Whimster 1981) and square barrow cemeteries of east Yorkshire (Stead 1991) both of which broadly date from the fourth to first centuries BC. Dating of the complete inhumations in Wales is problematic – only six radiocarbon dates exist in the literature and three are from the same site, RAF St. Athan (see Table 1). If these dates can be taken as broadly indicative then it suggests crouched inhumation was a long-lived tradition beginning in the late fifth or early fourth century BC and continuing to and after the Roman conquest.

### *Pathological and osteological data*

Skeletal pathological and osteological information is currently available for only nine individuals: four adult females and five adult males (Table 6). No information is available concerning cause of death.

Two of the males and one of the females exhibited robustly developed arm bones, while one of the men from RAF St. Athan had a bone deformation affecting the use of his right wrist. Two of the females exhibited features associated with persistent squatting. Four individuals exhibited badly worn and decayed teeth. The majority of individuals appear to have been involved in heavy or frequent manual labour, but the dataset is rather limited, and it is unclear how this pattern relates to the wider population.

### *Grave goods*

The number of recorded grave goods associated with skeletal remains is small (16) suggesting that most individuals (85%) were interred without accompaniments, although organic objects long since decayed may have been common. The most frequent type of durable item is some kind of personal ornament (brooch, neck-ring, bracelet and bone toggle) the others being more portable objects (weapons, pottery and a mirror). Age at death appears to have been a factor in the insertion of objects into the grave. Only adults are provided with grave goods, which may tentatively suggest a lack of hereditary privilege and wealth, although the sample size is small.

The dating of these burials with grave goods is problematic since in no case does any of the associated skeletal material have a radiocarbon determination (although bone fragments from within the Boverton bracelet have been submitted – see Nowakowski *et al.* 2009). However, in all instances burials with grave goods have been ascribed a Late Iron Age date. Some of these objects included within graves were exceptionally elaborate, such as the La Tene III sword from Gelliniog Wen, Anglesey (Hughes 1909), and the enigmatic (but now lost) bronze helmets from Ogmere, Vale of Glamorgan (Wheeler 1925). This has been argued to indicate the emergence of high-status individuals in Wales at this time (Pollack 2006, 19; Davies and Lynch 2000, 212-3). The majority of items however, such as brooches and bone toggles, are considerably less ostentatious, but likewise served to differentiate individuals, in

the burial environment at least, from others in wider society. We should not be surprised at the emphasis placed upon individual identity in Late Iron Age Wales as it reflects broad changes in the later prehistoric landscape where the creation of field systems and the emergence of many small enclosed settlements suggest a greater desire to emphasise individual status (Davis forthcoming).

## **Discussion: perceptions and problems**

It is 35 years since Whimster (1981) declared that the lack of burials in Wales was a real pattern. While there has been some attempt to update this view, notably Murphy (1992) and Pollack (2006), Whimster's conclusions have found general acceptance (Cunliffe 2010; Harding 2016). The goal of this paper has been to provide a more detailed analysis of the burial data to determine whether the absence *is* real or rather a perception resulting from previous studies that failed to recognise and gather together the dispersed evidence. This study has identified 112 records of human remains in Wales, which is clearly a significant increase on the eight originally identified by Whimster. Whilst this undoubtedly represents just a tiny fraction of the total Iron Age population in Wales, the size of the corpus is significant – it is now comparable to the 174 inhumation burials Whimster identified within pits in central southern England for instance (1981, 5). Therefore, it should no longer be accepted that there is only limited burial evidence from Wales. Moreover, it suggests that a comparable detailed trawl through the literature and unpublished material in other peripheral areas such as Scotland and northern England would yield similar results.

Five categories of disposal have been recognised, suggesting diverse funerary practices, but the inhumation of complete bodies represents the most common form of treatment. This contrasts with the situation in Wessex where skulls and isolated bones dominate and may suggest a specific regional tradition, although the pattern is likely skewed by differential recovery and preservation of remains. The vast majority of inhumations lie crouched with legs bent at the knee. Most are laid on their sides either left or right, but with a slight preference for left, with heads orientated predominantly to the north. These are persistent traits found throughout Britain and suggest that particular rules governing burial in this manner were recognised in Wales in later prehistory.

However, there are a number of issues that urgently need addressing. The dating of burials in Wales is particularly problematic. The majority are ascribed a date based upon association with Iron Age sites and only 20 radiocarbon dates exist for burials in the entire country. Although there is a broad indication of a change from cremation to inhumation as the dominant rite during the Middle Iron Age there is little precision and a program of retrospective dating of archived assemblages is desperately required. Similarly, pathological and osteological data is seriously lacking. It is not an exaggeration to say that we know almost nothing about the health, stature and mortality rates of Iron Age people in Wales and re-examination of remains from previous excavations could yield significant new data.

Finally, there is the question about what we can consider to be the normative burial rite in Wales. The dominance of 'invisible' burial rites, particularly excarnation, has often been cited in response to the relative paucity of burial remains not just in Wales but throughout Britain (Harding 2016; Carr and Knusel 1997; Ellison and Drewett 1971). Harding has recently argued that excarnation in hillforts was commonplace, the resulting residue of bones collected and deposited in the pits and ditches within settlements (2016). This could account

for the large quantities of isolated bone deposits found in many southern British contexts. However, recent macro and micro taphonomic studies on the condition of human bone from several hillfort and settlements in Wessex (Madgwick 2008; Booth and Madgwick 2016) have demonstrated that human bone from these contexts shows little evidence for gnawing and exposure which would be expected if excarnated. Drawing on such evidence an alternative hypothesis has been offered by Niall Sharples (2010; 2014) who has argued that the normal burial rite in central southern England was inhumation in shallow pits on the edge of contemporary settlements. Once buried, the individuals became generic ancestors, whose bones could be recovered and used by the living in rituals conducted within the settlements (Sharples 2014, 147).

Noticeably inhumation within settlement interiors does not seem to be the normal method of disposal in Wales. The majority of human bones found within settlement contexts are partially articulated remains, heads or parts of heads and isolated bones. Most inhumations have been random discoveries on the edges of settlements, suggesting that as in central southern England, the normal mode of burial for the majority of the population may have been in these peripheral locations. These areas are seldom targeted for archaeological investigation in Wales and easily overlooked given that evidence for graves or grave markers may be very ephemeral and easily destroyed through agricultural practices. Where later prehistoric landscapes are well-preserved we may have a better chance of identifying such burial evidence. Skomer Island, off the south-west coast of Pembrokeshire, for instance possesses such a landscape. The lack of modern cultivation has resulted in the preservation of clusters of roundhouses contained within a complex pattern of fields (Grimes 1950; Evans 1990). Recently obtained radiocarbon dates suggest the origins for this occupation was in the Early Iron Age (Barker *et al.* 2015). Small cairns are a common part of the island's surviving prehistoric architecture. Single cairns, often next to field boundaries are presumably the result of field clearance, but groups of six or more are often positioned in the middle of fields sometimes several hundred metres away from the focus of occupation. These probably represent the locations of small communal cemeteries, presumably the normal burial places of the island's occupants. The burials amongst the sand dunes at Merthyr Mawr Warren also appear to have been located several hundreds of metres from the settlement area identified by Savory (1954) suggesting this might be quite a widespread pattern.

This study has demonstrated that a detailed, contextual analysis of the currently available, but previously scattered, evidence allows us to challenge long-held perceptions and move towards a more nuanced understanding of funerary rites and beliefs. Ultimately though, little light can still be shed on wider aspects of later prehistoric demography in such regions. Questions concerning the specific biographies of individuals in Iron Age Wales, such as their health, diets and origins, or subtle differences in age or gender roles, remain elusive. The absence of detailed pathological and osteological studies mean we know almost nothing of the manner of inter-personal violence or the occurrence of disease. Even basic questions such as the role of particular burial rites, such as excarnation or cremation, or how this varied over time and place remain difficult to address with any confidence. Clearly, there is urgent need of research into these matters if we wish to develop a broader understanding of later prehistoric populations within the more 'peripheral' regions of Iron Age Britain.

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